Representation and acquisition of kind reference in L2 English

This dissertation investigates the acquisition of kind referring noun phrase interpretation such as (1), (2), and (3) in second language English (L2 English) by learners with Arabic, Turkish and Chinese as their first language (L1) backgrounds.

1) The Siberian tiger is extinct.
2) Siberian tigers are extinct.
3) Milk is nutritious.

A kind referring expression is a noun phrase that directly predicates a kind, as opposed to conveying some information about an individual, as indicated in the examples above (Krifka, Pelletier, Carlson, ter Meulen, Link, and Chierchia 1995). In English, a definite singular (1), and a bare plural (2) can be used as kind referring with count nouns. However, when mass nouns are used, the nominal can only have kind reference when it is bare (3). Arabic, Chinese, and Turkish differ from English in terms of how kind reference is expressed. The languages under investigation diverge drastically with respect to the article system, presence or absence of plural marking and licensing of bare nominals, which creates an optimum test case to investigate the learnability problem that second language learners face in acquiring subtle meaning distinctions to refer to kinds in a target language. While English has overt indefinite and definite articles, Turkish only has an overt indefinite article but lacks a definite article. Arabic seems to exhibit the reversed pattern compared to Turkish. While it has an overt definite article, it lacks an indefinite article. Chinese, however, lacks both indefinite and definite articles. The experimental component of the dissertation looks into the learnability problem the acquisition of kind referring expressions poses in L2 English. The research questions can be formulated as below:

i. Is Arabic, Chinese and Turkish L2 learners’ use of nominals and articles to express kind reference in English affected by the properties, particularly the distribution of articles and number marking of their L1?
ii. Do native speakers of English differ from L2 learners in how they employ the nominals and the article system to refer to kinds in English?

iii. What is the nature of the developmental trajectory in acquiring kind referring noun phrases when the first and second languages under investigation differ with respect to the availability of overt articles?

iv. Does L2 proficiency make a difference in L2 learners’ correct use of articles to refer to kinds in English?

To investigate these questions, I conducted a pilot study with 13 L2 learners of English with Arabic (5), Chinese (4) and Turkish (4) backgrounds, comparing their responses to 4 native speakers. The preliminary results based on a sentence completion task (SCT) and an acceptability judgment task (AJT) indicated that similarity between the L1 and the L2 did not always lead participants to act more native-like in their production and acceptability judgments. Although all the L2 learners had advanced proficiency levels in English, they differed from native speakers in a number of domains, one of which was failing to reject bare singulars as kind referring in English. Since all the L2 learners were collapsed to one group, the developmental trajectory that learners from different L1 backgrounds go through at different stages of their L2 proficiency could not be observed.

Other than unearthing the developmental trajectory in acquiring kind reference in L2 English, and trying to address the issue of whether L1 transfer is still at play in L2 acquisition in this domain, this dissertation will have implications regarding crosslinguistic variation within the nominal domain. More specifically, I will try to answer what accounts for crosslinguistic differences in the form-meaning mappings of kind referring NPs, particularly in Arabic, Chinese, Turkish, and English, and whether crosslinguistic variation within the nominal domain is due to the lexical items and what they denote or whether it is due to the functional projections (DP/NumP) above the NP, particularly to some feature(s) encoded in the article system.
Selected references


